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UNCLAS DHAKA 000102

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NARCOTICS ABUSE IN BANGLADESH ON THE RISE

11. (U) Summary: The number of Bangladeshi drug addicts is rising. While the media often focus on small-time dealers and destitute addicts, staff and a recovering addict at one NGO claim abuse is growing fastest among the relatively affluent, including college females. End Summary.

12. (U) There is no consensus number of drug addicts in Bangladesh, but some estimates go as high as 2.5 million. Local media regularly report on narcotics markets, primarily heroin, opium, and phensidyl, and their customers living on the fringes of urban society. More uncommon is reporting on relatively affluent abusers, though one article quoted a university proctor as saying drugs on campus is "an open secret."

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13. (SBU) Econoff recently met with Brother Ronald Drahozal, his deputy director, and a recovering addict of APON, Bangladesh's only 12-step substance abuse recovery program. They agreed that illicit drug usage in Bangladesh is escalating, but said that it cuts across socio-economic lines. The recovering addict, who spoke good English and appeared educated, stated that by the time he was 13, he and 50 percent of his classmates had experimented with cannabis and alcohol. By the time they were in high school, they had all moved on to injectable opiates, he said.

14. (SBU) Female university students, econoff was told, are increasingly performing opportunistic sex work to finance their drug habits and live fashionably. Asked why females from good backgrounds would begin abusing drugs in the first place, the NGO staff and the recovering addict suggested the women had been negatively influenced by female flat mates or male students.

15. (SBU) Comment: APON, a well regarded NGO and a former INL beneficiary, has an interest in communicating the worsening drug problem in Bangladesh. Yet, no one disputes that abuse here is a growing problem, that drug education in schools is inadequate, and that at least some of the widespread criminal violence in Bangladesh -- including arms trafficking in the Chittagong Hill Tracts -- is narcotics related. Acknowledgment of the problem is a notable step in a conservative, Islamic society. Bangladesh's imams proved to be valuable partners in our anti-human trafficking programs, and if properly approached they might be equally useful in anti-substance abuse initiatives.

THOMAS